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Portraiture and Progress: Similarities in LeBrun and Vernet

Emile Jean Horace Vernet's 1830 oil on canvas painting, "Portrait of the Marchesa Cunegonda Misciattelli with Her Infant and its Nurse" is more than 30 years younger than Elisabeth Vigée LeBrun's 1793 oil on canvas painting, "The Gräfin von Schönfeld." The two paintings have many similarities despite the difference in their respective ages and artist's genders. These similarities are visible in each painting's subject matter, purpose, composition, color schema and the feelings they evoke in the viewer.

Vernet's "Portrait of the Marchesa Cunegonda Misciattelli with Her Infant and its Nurse" depicts a woman sitting at a piano, looking slightly past her child, who is held toward the mother by a nursemaid. The title of the painting carries no hidden significance, as the subject of the painting is as stated: a portrait of three people who the viewer assumes to be the marquess, her child and its nurse (*marchesa* is the Italian word for marquess). LeBrun's "The Gräfin von Schönfeld" also has a reliable title, as the painting's subject is a woman the viewer presumes to be the countess (*gräfin* is German for countess). The title is not as wholly telling as that of Vernet's painting, however, as LeBrun's title says nothing of the child in the painting, who the viewer ultimately presumes to be the countess' daughter. Despite the absence of one figure's mention in LeBrun's title, both paintings' titles are faithful in telling the viewer what he or she is about to see—a portrait focusing on female, human figures.

The main female character in each painting is the one named in the title. In Vernet's painting, the first element to catch the viewer's eye is the marquess' face, which is turned outward more than the other two faces. The marquess' face is brightly lit by an unknown source and, though she does not look out of the painting directly to the viewer, her eyes engage the viewer's attention before the viewer has a chance to see any other element in the work. The viewer's eye then moves from the marquess upward, to the face of the nursemaid, and down to the infant. This pyramidal movement of the eye is characteristic of Renaissance paintings and came down over the years as a staple in academic painting. LeBrun's painting also includes a pyramidal structure, although it functions somewhat differently from the one in Vernet's portrait. Although the most eye-catching elements of LeBrun's portrait are the countess and child's outward-staring faces, the angle at which the work is viewed determines how the eye moves along the painting's pyramidal structure. When viewed straight-on, the eye begins at the faces, then moves down along the countess' arms, knees and sumptuous garments to the bottom corners of her bodily and cloth pyramid. When viewed from an angle slightly below the painting's midsection, the eye is drawn upward from the bottom of the pyramid to the engaging faces.

As the eye follows a similarly pyramidal path in each painting, so does it notice the slightly-off kilter balance in Vernet's painting as opposed to the perfect composition of LeBrun's. In LeBrun's portrait, the countess and child take up the middle third of the painting, the columns take up the left third and the landscape takes up the right third. In Vernet's painting, however, the human subjects form the middle of the left two-thirds of the painting, leaving the right third and far-left edge depicting only walls and piano. The compositional differences in symmetry bring out a similar lack in the use of perspective in each painting. LeBrun's painting only employs elements of perspective in the background landscape, to show the distance of the

trees and mountains from the human subjects. Vernet's painting is up-close and enclosed, with decorative walls forming a background very near the three figures. The figures in both paintings are proportional, realistically painted to human characteristics, and appear to fit perfectly with their surroundings. Even though LeBrun's painting incorporates symmetry and perspective when Vernet's does not, there are still ample similarities in the two works.

The background in each painting does not seem as important as the human figures. The background, the plain-wood piano and a tame but Rococo array of differently-colored wall panels with decorative embellishments evocative of the Voltaire Room in Potsdam's Schloß Sanssouci, are the final elements noticed in Vernet's painting, left for a final glance after close examination of the three figures and their relationships to one another. The females in LeBrun's painting also command primary attention, leaving the landscape to a secondary examination and the columnar architecture for a tertiary glance. In both cases, the architectural elements, the interior in the homes, is the last thing noticed. The landscape in LeBrun's painting is perhaps more noticeable because of its wild look, with quick brushstrokes emphasizing the untamed outdoors, and dark colors calling attention to an impending storm and stark contrast to the bright colors of the clothing on the figures inside. This exterior landscape emphasizes the tame domesticity of the inner world, a theme carried across in both portraits.

Both LeBrun and Vernet's paintings capture the calm serenity of quiet moments within the home, the interaction of family and those privy to the family's inner workings. In LeBrun's portrait the viewer sees a loving mother and child pair, cuddled up safely indoors as the storm approaches. Vernet's portrait depicts a dutiful nurse, an adoring child and a woman the viewer presumes to be educated because of her piano playing. The paintings are academically finished and painted in such a way as to please the patrons in those aristocratic families who

commissioned the two domestic works. Both portraits have an air of formality about them, and both capture figures in what the viewer would recognize as realistic, everyday moments. There are minor differences, however, in that each portrait is painted in accordance with a different movement. LeBrun's painting, the older of the two, carries a sense of Neoclassicism in the figures' dress and the building's architecture. The emphasis on the wild outdoors also feels Neoclassical. Vernet's painting, the younger of the two, appears more Academic, with its highly polished surface and a sense of pensive feeling in the moment. Although both portraits have a happy child in them, Vernet's happy child looks more quietly happy than LeBrun's, and the soft smiles on the nursemaid and marquess echo that quiet feeling in a more serious, adult way than LeBrun's countess' slight, Renaissance-reminiscent smile. The countess' pose is also more orchestrated in a Neoclassical manner than the realistic poses Vernet's figures hold.

Despite the slight difference in Neoclassical and Academic feelings the two paintings evoke, the grouping of people in each portrait is similarly lit. Both LeBrun and Vernet's women are the brightest elements in the painting. The countess and her daughter are equally bright in LeBrun's painting, with the architecture being second brightest and the landscape being darkest. The countess and infant in Vernet's painting are also the brightest elements, with the nursemaid being darker, the background being slightly darker than her, and the naturally-placed shadows being darkest. One of the central characters in each painting is clothed predominantly in white. In LeBrun's painting it is the child, and in Vernet's it is the marquess. Conversely, the countess is dressed mostly in a coppery red-orange color and the child in Vernet's painting is dressed in similar reddish tones. The nurse in Vernet's painting wears cool colors similar to those of the landscape in LeBrun's painting. It is safe to say, then, that the most important figures in each

painting wear either white or shades of red, and the figure or element of secondary interest is outfitted in blues, greens and grays.

One externally significant difference in the two paintings is the painter who created each one. LeBrun was a female painter, painting many portraits of domestic scenes. Marie Antoinette had her paint pictures of the queen with her children, trying to show the domestic, happy-family side of the fashionably chic queen (Rich, 1). LeBrun, although handicapped with the “misfortune” of being gendered female, was accepted into art academies all over Europe and also seen as an allegorical history painter (Rich, 1). She had to work very hard to achieve her status in a male-dominated world, which is evident today in the variety of kinds of paintings she left behind. Vernet was a man, which automatically gave him more freedom to paint subjects of his choosing (within the confines of the classical, academic style he painted in) during the era both portraits were created (Malyon, 1). The fact that both a male and female painter chose to paint domestic portraits shows the importance of that mode of painting to each painter’s success, the commissioning aristocratic household and portraiture’s continuance through evolving artistic movements.

Although they were painted 37 years apart and in two different artistic movements, Elisabeth Vigée LeBrun’s “The Gräfin von Schönfeld” and Emile Jean Horace Vernet’s “Portrait of the Marchesa Cunegonda Misciattelli with Her Infant and its Nurse” bear many similarities. The two portraits deal with similar subject matter, employ resemblant lighting and composition, and illustrate the importance of the portraiture mode of painting. The nearly-40 year age difference does not make it easy to distinguish the Neoclassical portrait from the Academic one, nor does it show a difference in the types of patrons who commissioned portraits of domestic subject matter—the aristocrats.

Works Cited

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